BOOK THREE

"HOUR OF THE WOLF"

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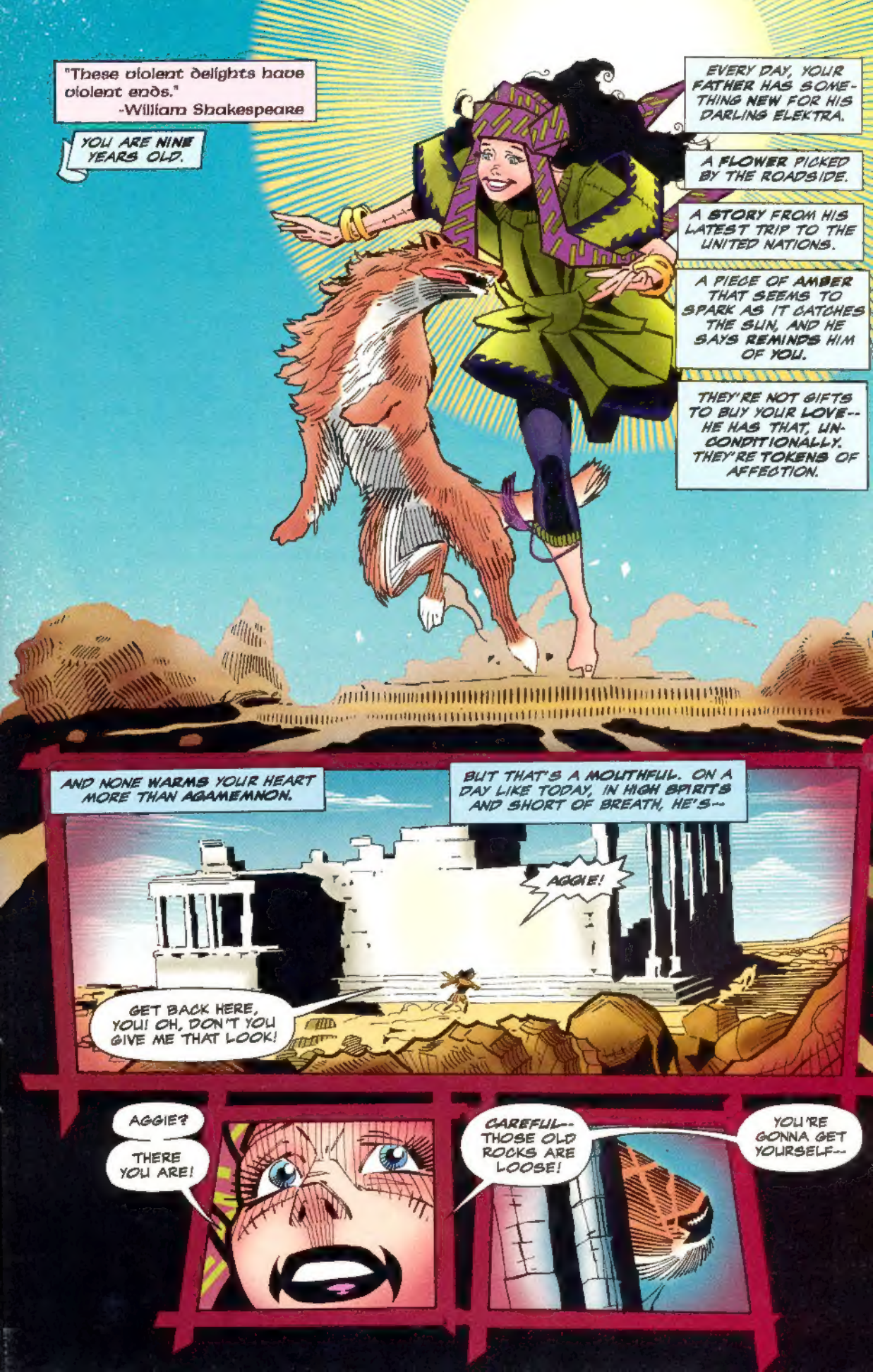
SIDE BY SIDE -

A Message From The Ministry Of Homeland Security


"These violent delights have violent ends."
-William Shakespeare
YOU ARE NINE YEARS OLD.
EVERY DAY, YOUR FATHER HAS SOMETHING NEW FOR HIS DARLING ELEKTRA.
A FLOWER PICKED BY THE ROADSIDE.
A STORY FROM HIS LATEST TRIP TO THE UNITED NATIONS.
A PIECE OF AMBER THAT SEEMS TO SPARK AS IT CATCHES THE SUN, AND HE SAYS REMINDS HIM OF YOU.
THEY'RE NOT GIFTS TO BUY YOUR LOVE--HE HAS THAT, UNCONDITIONALLY. THEY'RE TOKENS OF AFFECTION.
AND NONE WARMS YOUR HEART MORE THAN AGAMEMNON.
BUT THAT'S A MOUTHFUL. ON A DAY LIKE TODAY, IN HIGH SPIRITS AND SHORT OF BREATH, HE'S--
AGGIE!
GET BACK HERE, YOU! OH, DON'T YOU GIVE ME THAT LOOK!
AGGIE?
THERE YOU ARE!
CAREFUL--THOSE OLD ROCKS ARE LOOSE!
YOU'RE GONNA GET YOURSELF--

HURT?
YOUR CONCERN IS TOUCHING, LITTLE GAL...
...IF A GOOD 12 INCHES TOO LATE TO SAVE YOUR MUTT!
AG-AGGIE?
DON'TCHA WORRY NONE, GIRLY...WE'RE FRIENDS!
DON'T INSULT THE CHILD'S INTELLIGENCE, THEO!
MY--MY FATHER--HE'S AN IMPORTANT MAN, HE'LL--
MR. AMBASSADOR CAN MAKE US LIKE THAT, TOO! ODDS ARE HE WON'T COME ACROSS RIGHT OFF...
...BUT I'M BETTIN' DADDY GETS REAL AGREEABLE FIRST TIME HE HEARS HIS LITTLE GIRL SCREAM!
MMM-MMM--"AMBASSADOR NATCHIOS"! VERY IMPORTANT, VERY POWERFUL!
I DON'T SCREAM--
OH, I BET YOU DO! I BET A TASTY YOUNG MISS LIKE YOU MAKES ALL SORTA SWEET NOISE--
I'M ONLY GOING TO TELL YOU ONCE...

...TAKE YOUR HANDS OFF HER!
HO-HO, BOYS--WE GOT OURSELVES A HERO!
HIM AND THE BRAT CAN SCREAM TOGETHER!
I'LL TAKE THEM OFF FOR YOU...
"TAKE OUR HANDS OFF," HE SAYS! UH-HUH! OR YOU'LL WHAT, PUNK?
SSHLINKG

HE STARTS AT THE WRIST, THE BLADE FLASHING UP FROM THERE.
LIKE THE AMBER YOUR FATHER GAVE, THE STRANGER'S WEAPON SEEMS TO SPARK AS IT CATCHES THE SUN--
--UNTIL THERE IS SO MUCH BLOOD IT CAN ONLY GLISTEN.
SEEMING CONTRADICTIONS SCAR YOUR MIND.
VICIOUS-BEAUTIFUL.
BRUTAL-FLUID
SAVAGE-DIVINE.
YOU KNOW YOU SHOULD HAVE LOOKED AWAY--INSTEAD OF STUDYING EVERY MOVE.
I'M ORESTEZ...
YOU THINK HIM EXTRAORDINARY. AND MORE THAN ANYTHING, YOU WANT THE SAME FOR YOURSELF.
MY NAME'S ELEKTRA.
I KNOW...I KNEW YOU A LONG TIME AGO! WHEN YOU WERE VERY YOUNG.
LET'S GO HOME NOW...

ORESTEZ HELPS YOU BURY AGAMEMMNON.
YOU LEAVE YOUR WOULD-BE KIDNAPPERS TO ROT IN THE MIDDAY HEAT.
BACK AT THE HOUSE, FATHER'S TEARS OF RELIEF STREAK DOWN HIS FACE AND CATCH IN HIS JOYFUL SMILE.
THANK GOD, MY BABY-- THANK GOD!
THOSE--MEN--HAD A NOTE DELIVERED HERE! ALL THREATS AND VILE--ELEKTRA, I WAS SO WORRIED!
IT'S OKAY, FATHER-- ORESTEZ MADE IT ALL RIGHT!
YES... ORESTEZ!
THE PAST... IS BEST FORGOTTEN. COME BACK TO US NOW, WON'T YOU?
HOW DO I FORGET? ALL THE REMINDER I NEED IS STANDING THERE WITH YOU!
KEEP HER SAFE--TEACH HER HOW TO PROTECT HERSELF!
SON!
TAKE GOOD CARE OF MY LITTLE SISTER, FATHER...
THE NEXT MORNING, YOUR FATHER FLIES IN A SENSEI FROM JAPAN'S IGA PROVINCE.
THAT AFTERNOON, YOU RECEIVE YOUR FIRST LESSON IN THE MARTIAL ARTS.

THIS VERY NIGHT.

ST. GEORGE, UTAH.

ELEKTRA'S LONG YEARS OF TRAINING HAVE PAID OFF.

SHE RECEIVED NO COLORFUL BELT FOR HER STUDIES.

IF THERE WAS ANY AWARD, IT WAS A MIX OF BLOOD AND SHADOWS.

WE'LL DO YOU, KUNOICHI, DO YOU LIKE THE WHORE YOU ARE!

IF IT HAS ANY NAME, THAT WOULD BE NINJA.

HER SAI'S IMPACT SHATTERS FERUZE'S STERNUM, SENDING A SPRAY OF BRITTLE WHITE SHOOTING OUT HIS BACK.

GENKOTSU'S CERVICAL VERTABRAE EXPLODE IN SEQUENCE, MAKING SOUNDS LIKE POPPING LIGHTBULBS.

DOKA'S LARNYX SHREDS AND COLLAPSES, STAGGERING HIM BACK RASPING FOR AIR.

QUIET.

COMFORTING TO KNOW ELEKTRA'S HERE TO SAVE A LIFE.

W-WHAT'S THIS ABOUT? WHO'S AFTER ME?

DON'T ASK, FATHER... JUST PRAY!

THAT LIFE WOULD BELONG TO PETER NOVA, A PRIEST OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH.

IN LIGHT OF THAT, IT MIGHT BE HOPED THAT GOD IS ON ELEKTRA'S SIDE.

WHICH WOULD PUT THE DEVIL ON THE OTHER.
DON'T WASTE TIME WITH ELEKTRA!
THE DEVIL... OR THE NEXT WORSE THING.
THE SNAKEROOT.
THE DARKEST CABAL OF KILLERS THE PLANET HAS EVER KNOWN.
THEY SOLD WHAT SOULS THEY HAD TO WALK CLOSE WITH DEATH.
TO LEARN HIS SECRETS.
TO CHEAT HIS TOUCH.
AND FIRST IN LINE WAS THE WARRIOR TEKAGI.
HIS SAVAGERY DRIVES THE SNAKEROOT.
THE HOLY MAN IS WHAT WE WANT!
IN TURN, HE IS DRIVEN BY THE FURY OF SAKKI--
--THE NOTORIOUS SWORD THAT IS THE FORCE OF THE KILLER.
ITS STEEL HAS GROWN COARSE WITH ROT.
IT HUNGERS FOR INNOCENT BLOOD TO WASH IT CLEAN.
TEKAGI HUNGERS, TOO.

ELEKTRA DIDN'T COME ALONE. SHE BROUGHT HER RYU--
--AN ORDER OF NIN-JUTSU GATHERED TO TAKE THE RIGHTEOUS HIGH GROUND
WHAT GIVES FIRST, IMPACT? MY RIBS OR YOUR--
TWO OF THEM WERE DEAD 17 SECONDS AFTER THE SNAKE-ROOT HIT.
ELEKTRA'S EAGER TO RETURN THE FAVOR
CATCH YOUR BREATH, IMPACT!
DAMN IT! WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO KEEP THEM DOWN?
MORE THAN YOUR KIND CAN MANAGE, LOVER!
LYNCH!
MASQUERADE!
TKWAAP!
DEAD. ALONG WITH TARGET AND N KO THAT'S --
I KNOW. WE'RE DOWN TO THREE
THREE'S A MAGIC NUMBER, ELEKTRA! TAKE IT--
--A GIFT FOR WHAT WE ONCE HAD!
TAKE IT AND RUN.

MAKE TIME, HANSHI-- I'LL HOLD THE REAR!
I DON'T LIKE LEAVING YOU, SALVO!
BELIEVE ME-- I'M NO FAN OF IT, EITHER!
TRACK THEM, IMPACT!
SENSES ARE HYPED... I'M ON IT!
WHY-- WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?
YOU'RE A GOOD MAN, FATHER--YOU DO GOOD FOR THOSE AROUND YOU. THAT'S ALL THE REASON THEY NEED!
AND WHAT'S YOURS? PROTECTING ME...OR PROVING SOMETHING TO YOURSELF?
ASK EVERETT SALVO WHY HE JOINED ELEKTRA'S RYU.
MAYBE HE'LL TELL A STORY ABOUT A MOTHER WHO URGED HER SON TO BATTLE INJUSTICE.
GET HIM DRUNK, THOUGH, AND MAYBE HE'LL TELL THE TRUTH.
SALVO IS NO-KAJUTSU, A MASTER OF FIRE AND EXPLOSIVE.
ONCE LEARNED, NO-KAJUTSU CAN NOT BE CONTAINED. IT COMMANDS TO BE DETONATED.

BRAKOOM!
SALVO JOINED ELEKTRA SO HE COULD INDULGE HIS TALENT FOR DESTRUCTION--
BRAKOOM!
--AND BE ASSURED OF TARGETS THAT WOULD LET HIM REST EASY.
IT'S NOT NOBLE, BUT IT'S REAL.
IF HE MAKES IT OUT OF THIS ALIVE, EVERETT SALVO'S GONNA SLEEP LIKE A BABY.
SKRAAAK!
YOU'RE VERY GOOD, NINJA-- AND FOR THAT YOU HAVE TO DIE!
I CAN SAY THE SAME ABOUT YOU, SNAKEROOT!
KRAKOOM!

WIPING THAT MOTHERLESS DEATH'S HEAD GRIN OFF YOUR FACE--
--IS ONLY GONNA TAKE ONE SHOT--
KLIIK!
MISSING SOMETHING?
YOU-- PULLED THE AMMO--
WHAT CAN I SAY? I'M JUST AN UNDERHANDED S.O.B.!
REST IN PEACE, NO-KAJUTSU...

WHAT'S THAT HE'S DOING TO HIS HANDS?
A KIND OF ACUPUNCTURE-- IT DRIVES UP IMPACT'S SENSES!
ANYTIME YOU RE READY..
MAYBE IT GIVES US AN EDGE ON THE SNAKEROOT'S APPROACH.
NOT AS MUCH AS I'D LIKE. NOT IN TH S WEATHER.
THEY KNOW THAT. STAY ON IT.
AFRAID OF HEIGHTS, FATHER?
A--A LITTLE!
TIME TO GET OVER IT
I--STILL DON'T UNDER-STAND? WHAT DO THESE SNAKEROOT WANT?
YOUR BLOOD. YOURS, AND TWO OTHERS'.
A RITUAL TO TURN THEIR SWORD'S DECAY BACK TO SHARP STEEL.

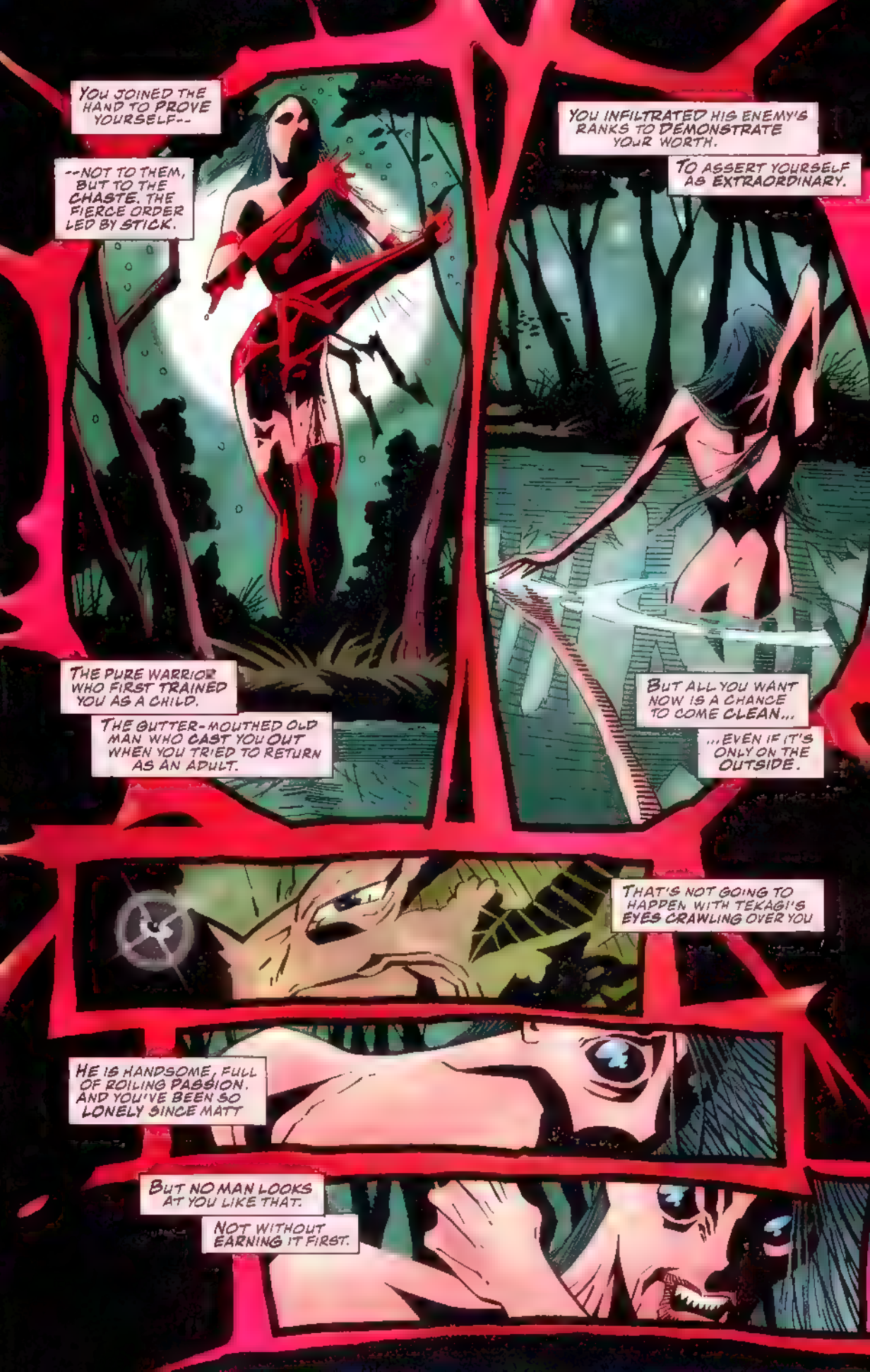
NOT QUITE WATER INTO WINE, BUT YOU GET THE IDEA!
HRYYNF
NOW, IMPACT
ALREADY THERE
FWINK!
AND YOU'VE GOT BAD BLOOD WITH THEIR LEADER--SO IT'S PERSONAL!
I'VE GOT BAD BLOOD WITH MYSELF--THAT'S WHY IT'S PERSONAL.
IN ANY CASE, I SUPPOSE I SHOULD THANK YOU...
THANK HER, PADRE, BY ALL MEANS--SHE'S PUSHED BACK YOUR OBITUARY ALL OF FIVE MINUTES!
SHRAAAK!
THEY'RE COMING IN FROM ALL OVER--

THE STORM FADES BEFORE THINGS MORE PRIMAL.
--ALL AT ONCE--
GYRUK
GIVE ME YOUR HAND, NOVA, GIVE ME--
I WON'T ASK YOU TO FORGIVE ME.
C-CAN'T HELP IT. IT'S --IT'S IN MY NATURE
AND THIS IS IN MINE.
DRINK DEEP, GREAT SAKKI.
BEGIN TO HEAL YOUR WOUNDS.

THE ONSLAUGHT FROM ABOVE DELAYS ELEKTRA ONLY A SECOND
TIME ENOUGH FOR TEKAGI TO MELT BACK INTO THE SHADOWS.
G-GONE... THEY'RE GONE...
YES. OF COURSE
TEKAGI HAS WHAT HE CAME FOR. AND WE DON'T MATTER
I DON'T MATTER...

"There is in every true woman's heart a spark of heavenly fire...which kindles up, and blazes in the dark hour of adversity."
-Washington Irving

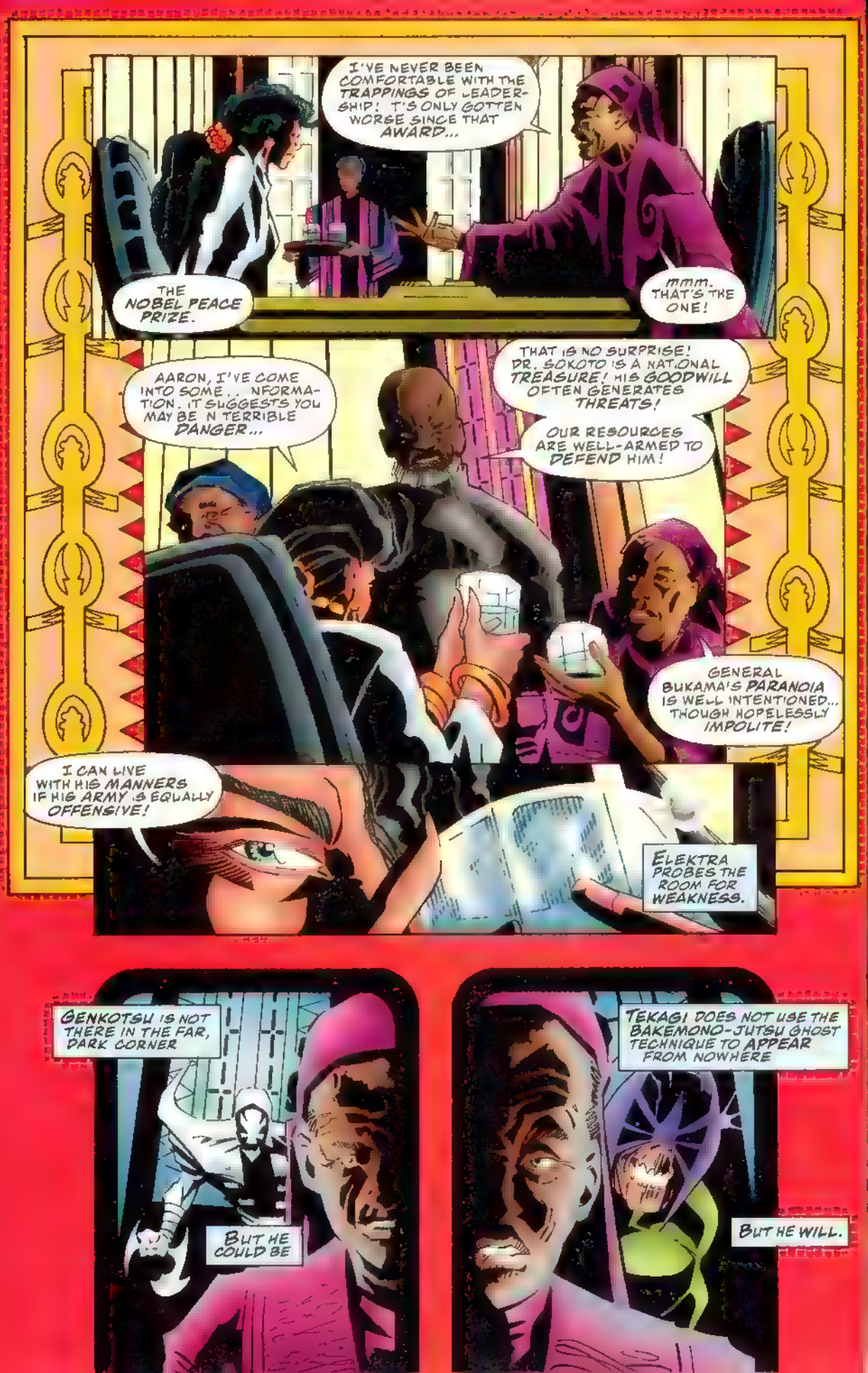
SCHWARZWALD, DEUTSCHLAND
THE WOLF GOES WHERE HE CHOOSES
WHEN HE PLEASES.
TAKING WHAT HE WANTS
THE PACK IS VICIOUS AND BLOOD-HUNGRY...
...BUT THEY KNOW THE SCENT OF A DEADLIER PREDATOR.
THE HAND
A NINJA CLAN OF ASSASSINS
YOUR NEW FAMILY.
YOU ARE ZZ
WE'LL MAKE CAMP HERE!
TO YOUR MANY ACCOMPLISHMENTS, YOU'VE JUST ADDED PREMEDITATED MURDER.
JUST ONE OF MANY GRISLY INITIATIONS YOU'VE HAD TO ENDURE...
...OVERSEEN BY THE IMPERIOUS CHUNIN TEKAGI.
OFF FOR A LITTLE PRIVATE TIME, KUNOICHI, HMMM?


You joined the Hand to prove yourself--
--not to them, but to the Chaste. The fierce order led by Stick.
The pure warrior who first trained you as a child.
The gutter-mouthed old man who cast you out when you tried to return as an adult.
You infiltrated his enemy's ranks to demonstrate your worth.
To assert yourself as extraordinary.
But all you want now is a chance to come clean...
...even if it's only on the outside.
That's not going to happen with Tekagi's eyes crawling over you
He is handsome, full of roiling passion. And you've been so lonely since Matt
But no man looks at you like that.
Not without earning it first.

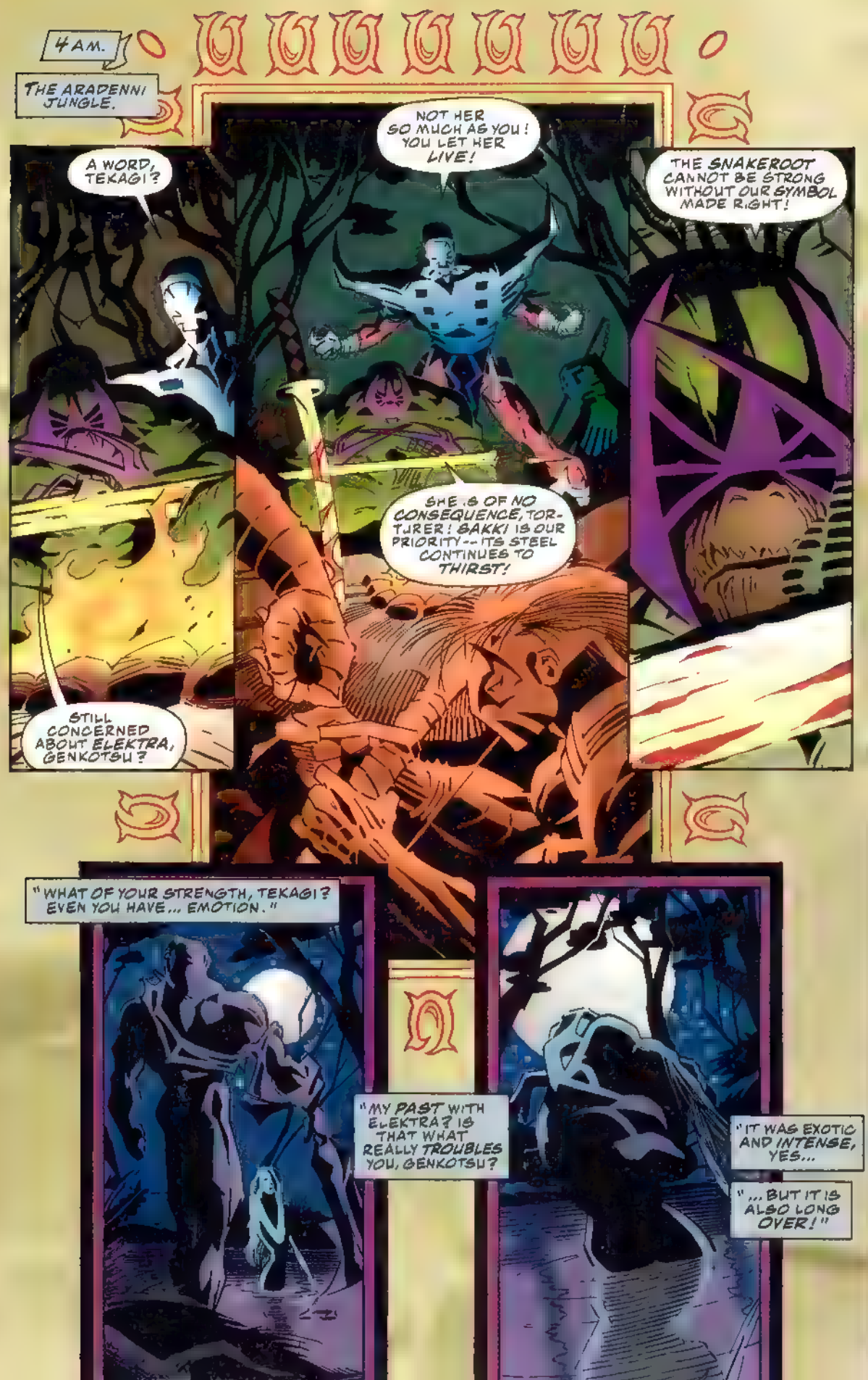
YOU SLASH WITH YOUR MIND.
KIDNAP THE OTHER NINJAS' KI.
COMMAND THEIR LIFE FORCE TO YOUR WILL.
STAND DOWN, GENIN! SHEATHE YOUR WEAPONS AND--
--HROOG!
THEY NEVER HEAR TEKAGI'S ORDERS.
OR HIS SCREAMS.
THERE'S ONLY YOUR VOICE IN THEIR HEADS, COLD AND MERCILESS.

THE WATER IS WARM AND GENTLE OVER YOUR BREASTS. YOU THINK YOU CAN LOSE YOURSELF HERE FOR HOURS.
SOMEWHERE CLOSE, A WOLF BEGINS TO HOWL.
WHAT'S LEFT OF YOUR "PUPPETS" WON'T BE NEEDING THESE!
NOW CAN I WATCH?
TEKAGI IS HANDSOME FULL OF PASSION. YOU'VE BEEN SO LONELY.
AND YOU GIVE UP HOPE OF EVER BECOMING CLEAN AGAIN.

THE CITY STATE OF ARADENNI, AFRICA.
DR. SOKOTO... THANK YOU FOR TAKING TIME OUT OF YOUR BUSY SCHEDULE!
"TAKING TIME"-- NONSENSE, ELEKTRA! AND IT'S "AARON"-- "DOCTOR" WAS MANNERS WHEN YOU WERE A LITTLE GIRL!
AARON, THEN
IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE-- I REMEMBER YOU LIKE THIS-- TRAVELING THE DIPLOMATIC CIRCLE WITH YOUR FATHER...
...I KNOW 'TIS LONG PAST, BUT I AM SORRY FOR HIS PASSING! HE WAS A KIND SPIRIT-- "LITTLE AMBER" HE CALLED YOU
IT'S A LONG TIME SINCE I HEARD THAT!
SOMETHING COLD TO DRINK?
I KNOW JUST THE THING! SWEET WITH JUST A BITE--
'TIS MY JOB!
DR. SOKOTO!
OH. SORRY!


I'VE NEVER BEEN COMFORTABLE WITH THE TRAPPINGS OF LEADERSHIP! IT'S ONLY GOTTEN WORSE SINCE THAT AWARD...
THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE.
mmm. THAT'S THE ONE!
AARON, I'VE COME INTO SOME... NFORMATION. IT SUGGESTS YOU MAY BE N TERRIBLE DANGER...
THAT IS NO SURPRISE! DR. SOKOTO IS A NATIONAL TREASURE! HIS GOODWILL OFTEN GENERATES THREATS!
OUR RESOURCES ARE WELL-ARMED TO DEFEND HIM!
GENERAL BUKAMA'S PARANOIA IS WELL INTENTIONED... THOUGH HOPELESSLY IMPOLITE!
I CAN LIVE WITH HIS MANNERS IF HIS ARMY IS EQUALLY OFFENSIVE!
ELEKTRA PROBES THE ROOM FOR WEAKNESS.
GENKOTSU IS NOT THERE IN THE FAR, DARK CORNER
BUT HE COULD BE
TEKAGI DOES NOT USE THE BAKEMONO-JUTSU GHOST TECHNIQUE TO APPEAR FROM NOWHERE
BUT HE WILL.

GENERAL BUKAMA?
WHAT IS IT?
BE VERY SURE.
MUST YOU RUSH OFF SO SOON?
I'M... AFRAID SO, AARON. PLEASE CONSIDER MY WARNING.
WE'LL LOOK INTO IT!
I APPRECIATE YOUR COMING TO ME LIKE THIS, ELEKTRA! YOUR CONCERN TOUCHES MY HEART...
... BUT YOURS SEEMS TROUBLED. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?
NO.
I DON'T BELIEVE THAT I AM...


4 AM.
THE ARADENNI JUNGLE.
A WORD, TEKAGI?
STILL CONCERNED ABOUT ELEKTRA, GENKOTSU?
NOT HER SO MUCH AS YOU! YOU LET HER LIVE!
SHE IS OF NO CONSEQUENCE, TORTURER! BAKKI IS OUR PRIORITY -- ITS STEEL CONTINUES TO THIRST!
THE SNAKEROOT CANNOT BE STRONG WITHOUT OUR SYMBOL MADE RIGHT!
"WHAT OF YOUR STRENGTH, TEKAGI? EVEN YOU HAVE... EMOTION."
"MY PAST WITH ELEKTRA? IS THAT WHAT REALLY TROUBLES YOU, GENKOTSU?
"IT WAS EXOTIC AND INTENSE, YES...
"...BUT IT IS ALSO LONG OVER!"

IT'S MY EXPERIENCE EMOTIONS CAN BE EXPLOITED.
DON'T PRESUME TO COMPARE YOUR EXPERIENCES TO MINE!
AS YOU SAY, JONIN.
BUT IF THERE COMES A MOMENT OF WEAKNESS--
THAT'S WHEN IT ERUPTS FROM THE LUSH GREEN.
ALL TOOTH AND CLAW AND CRAVING.
SOMETIMES THE FOUR-LEGGED BEAST HAS THE EDGE ON THE TWO-LEGGED.
SOMETIMES IT DOESN'T.
DINNER, GENIN!
WEAKNESS IS NOT AN ISSUE, TORTURER!
I'LL TAKE THE HEART...

ARADENNI MILITARY AIRFIELD
HI-TECH WEAPONRY GLEAMS, DEADLY AND EAGER
980
IT CAN'T BEGIN TO COMPARE WITH WHAT NOW SLIPS OUT OF THE NIGHT.
ELEKTRA'S WARNING SETS OFF AN ALARM.
ARRANGEMENTS WERE MADE TO SMUGGLE SOKOTO OUT OF THE COUNTRY FOR SAFEKEEPING.

She's come to see him off... and watch his back.
Only one guard.
The ninja can't help but scowl at the laxity.
Bukama...
Elektra can't help as the scowl turns to shock.
Thick hangar doors kept the [illegible] confined within.
The aftermath of the snakeroot.
A little slice of hell right here on earth.

THE HOT BARREL JUST STARTING TO COOL.
TEN MINUTES AFTER DEATH, FLIES BEGIN TO LAY THEIR EGGS.
THEY COULD STILL BE LURKING.
EVERY INSTINCT FOR SURVIVAL TELLS HER TO RUN.
NO TRACE OF AGONY MARKS THE FEATURES. THERE'S ONLY EMPTINESS, SOULLESS AND DEGRADING.
ONE OF NINJUTSU'S FIRST LESSONS IS THAT THE DEAD ARE PART OF THE PAST.
THEY ARE NO LONGER TO BE CONSIDERED.
BUT THIS MAN KNEW HER FATHER.
AARON SOKOTO TOUCHED HER WITH A NAME SHE HADN'T DARED OPEN HERSELF UP TO IN YEARS. "LITTLE AMBER."
THERE IS NO SUN IN THIS DARK PLACE...
...BUT SOMETH NG INSIDE ELEKTRA CATCHES AND BEGINS TO SPARK.

ΛΟΔΕΡΑ·ΡΥΖ·
CLOSE TO THE TOP OF THE WORLD.
ABOVE THE CLOUD-LINE OF THE NEARBY MOUNTAIN STRETCHES A WALL OF ICE.
ONLY A CHASTE FEW HAVE EVER CLIMBED IT AND SURVIVED.
FOR A TIME, ELEKTRA NUMBERED AMONG THEM...
...BEFORE SHE FELL FROM GRACE.
THIS LONG-NEGLECTED PLACE BELONGS TO THEM.
ANXIOUS FINGERS SEARCH THE MILDEWED WOOD FOR A HIDDEN SWITCH...
...UNTIL RAGE PROVIDES A KEY OF ITS OWN.
FWRAK!
THE DANK ROCK SMELLS LIKE IT DID WHEN YOU WERE TWELVE.
A STENCH OF DREAD AND MENACE.

PLEASE, STICK... I DON'T WANT TO!
STONE... HE SAYS THE CAVE IS DEATH!
GET USED TO THE IDEA, BRAT! THINK YOURSELF DEAD AND YOU'VE NOTHIN' TO FEAR!
MAYBE THEN YOU DO THINGS THE ORDINARY JACK AN' JILL WON'T!
BUT MAYBE YOU'RE NO BETTER THAN ORDINARY...
THIS--THIS ISN'T THAT! IT'S PAY-BACK--FOR ME LOOKIN' INSIDE YOUR HEAD--SEEIN' 'BOUT YOUR WIFE AND LITTLE GIRL AND--
SHUT UP! SHUT UP AND WALK!
OR KEEP TALKIN' AND DIE! YOUR CALL, SNOT-NOSE...
BRUTE FORCE COULD NEVER DEFEAT THE SNAKEROOT'S RAW FEROCITY.
VICTORY IS ONLY THROUGH THE CUNNING AT THE HARD-HEART OF SHINOBI-NO-JUTSU.
ENDURE THE CAVE'S TRIALS, FOCUS THAT STEALTH--OR SIMPLY PERISH.
THERE IS A WHISPER FROM DOWN BELOW.
A PROMISE OF BLOOD AND SHADOWS.
AND ELEKTRA STEPS FORWARD INTO THE BLACKNESS.

Next: She Who Slays

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FRANK MILLER

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